Spying on the Spies

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The National Security Agency has its ear to the world, but doesn't listen to everyone at once.

That was one conclusion of a new report, Interception Capabilities 2000, accepted late last week by the European Parliament's Science and Technology Options Assessment Panel (STOA).

The panel commissioned Duncan Campbell, a British investigative reporter, to prepare a report on Echelon, the US-led satellite surveillance network.

"I have no objection to these systems monitoring serious criminals and terrorists," said Glyn Ford, a British Labour Party member of parliament and a committee member of STOA. "But what is missing here is accountability, clear guidelines as to who they can listen to, and in what circumstances these laws apply."

Campbell was asked to investigate the system in the wake of charges made last year in the European Parliament that Echelon was being used to funnel European government and industry secrets into US hands.

"What is new and important about this report is that it contains the first ever documentary evidence of the Echelon system," said Campbell. Campbell obtained the document from a source at Menwith Hill, the principal NSA communications monitoring station, located near Harrogate in northern England.

The report details how intelligence agencies intercept Internet traffic and digital communications, and includes screen shots of traffic analysis from NSA computer systems.

Interception Capabilities 2000 also provides an account of a previously unknown, secret international organization led by the FBI. According to Campbell, the "secret" organization, called ILETS (International Law Enforcement Telecommunications Seminar), is working on building backdoor wiretap capabilities into all forms of modern communications, including satellite communications systems.

"[The report] is undoubtedly the most comprehensive look at Echelon to date because of its attention to detail -- [and] the NSA's use of technology," said John Young, a privacy activist in New York.

Although the United States has never officially acknowledged Echelon's existence, dozens of investigative reports over the past decade have revealed a maze-like system that can intercept telephone, data, cellular, fax, and email transmissions sent anywhere in the world.

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Previously, Echelon computers were thought to be able to scan millions of telephone lines and faxes for keywords such as "bomb" and "terrorist." But Campbell's report maintains that the technologies to perform such a global dragnet do not exist.

Instead, Campbell said that the system targets the communications networks of known diplomats, criminals, and industrialists of interest to the intelligence community.
The report charges that popular software programs such as Lotus Notes and Web browsers include a "back door," through which the NSA can gain access to an individual's personal information.

Citing a November 1997 story in the Swedish newspaper, *Svenska Dagbladet*, the report said that "Lotus built in an NSA 'help information' trapdoor to its Notes system, as the Swedish government discovered to its embarrassment."

The report goes on to describe a feature called a "workfactor reduction field" that is built into Notes and incorporated into all email sent by non-US users of the system. The feature reportedly broadcasts 24 of the 64 bits of the key used for each communication, and relies on a public key that can only be read by the NSA.

The new report emerges as politicians on both sides of the Atlantic are growing increasingly concerned about Echelon and its capabilities.

"I believe that it's time that there is some congressional scrutiny of the Echelon project and I am examining a way to do that," said Representative Bob Barr (R-Georgia). "I understand the need for secrecy -- I was with the CIA myself -- but Echelon has raised some questions about fundamental policy and constitutional rights."

Barr is concerned that the NSA is using its Echelon partners to help it sidestep laws that forbid the US government from spying on its own people.

"The only significant examination of spy systems in the United States was the Church Report, which was prompted by Watergate in the early '70s," said Poole. "I hope that Europe's interest in the Echelon system will spark some new debate in the US."

Echelon is believed to be principally operated by the NSA and its British counterpart, the Government Communications Headquarters. The system also reportedly relies on agreements with similar agencies in other countries, including Canada's Communications Security Establishment, Australia's Defense Signals Directorate, and New Zealand's Government Communications Security Bureau.

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